

THE  
CANADIAN PACIFIC RAILWAY  
TELEGRAPH.

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Remarks on its Present Condition and the necessity for  
an Immediate Change of Location.

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*A Letter addressed to the Hon. Sir Charles Tupper, K.C.M.G.,  
Minister of Railways and Canals,*

— BY —

ACTON BURROWS, of Winnipeg.

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# The Canadian Pacific Railway Telegraph.

*To the Hon. the Minister of Railways and Canals :*

SIR,—The importance of a thoroughly efficient system of telegraphic service in connection with the Canadian Pacific Railway, respecting which we had a brief conversation recently, induces me to lay before you what may be considered as the general opinion entertained in Manitoba and the North-West Territories in reference to the Canadian Pacific Telegraph.

The sections of the line west of Red River, which I have had the opportunity of inspecting at several points during the past summer, afford prominent examples of one of the most egregious blunders ever made by a Minister of Public Works. It is not necessary here to refer at length to the political view of this act of the late Administration, to the fact that the contracts for the construction of the line were let during recess, and without the authority of Parliament; or to the still more extraordinary feature, that the route was determined on, and at least the portion of the line west of Selkirk constructed before a final location of the railway had been made.

My observations compel me to say that the route chosen for its erection was and is unsuitable; that the cost of its erection was excessive; that the annual subsidy now paid for its maintenance is too high; that the frequency with which it is out of working order renders it comparatively useless; that the tariff of rates charged by the lessee is exorbitant, and that before it can become effective its route requires to be changed from the present location north of Lake Manitoba, so as to run along the route of the 100 miles of railway now in construction west of Winnipeg.

## THE ROUTE.

The lowness and wet nature of the land between Selkirk and Livingstone, renders it totally unfit for the route of a telegraph line. In the Commons, last year, Mr. Kirkpatrick very well explained its disadvantages. Speaking of an interview with the Bishop of Rupert's Land, he said :—

“He asked him some questions about the country, and the Bishop said it was very wet, and that the country through which the railroad was going to cross was all under water. He (Mr. Kirkpatrick) said it could be drained. The Bishop shrugged his shoulders, and said that the land was below the level of the lake, and it would be very difficult to drain it. This was such an astonishing statement that he made some

further enquires; and he found a gentleman there, a very intelligent man, who went over this country with a view of taking a sub-contract from Sifton, Ward & Co., contractors from Selkirk west.

He travelled from the Red River westward, along the located line,—he went in the month of June—and when they came to the muskegs, five or six miles west of Red River, they had to cross them on snow-shoes, in the month of June, and even then, he said, they sometimes broke through up to their middles. He told him that he had a pole with him 20 feet long, pointed with iron, and they could not find bottom with it.

He asked the honorable members from Manitoba to tell the House whether it was not there, currently reported that the land was below water, and whether it was not authoritatively borne out by the report on the table of the House. To show the character of this report, Mr. Fleming said, on page 39, that, for about 10 miles up to the Narrows of Lake Manitoba, the level was generally low. He had shown them that it was below the lake level, and he asked the House to look into it, and see whether this report was correct.—*Debates*, 1873, pages 572 and 573.

Mr. Dubé, officially reporting to the Department with reference to the country between Selkirk and the Narrows of Lake Manitoba, said:—

"The marshes and muskegs are numerous, many of the latter being impassable for carts, and certain numerous small lakes and ponds."

Before the Senate Committee on the route of the C.P.R. west of Keewatin, Mr. S. J. Dawson testified as follows:—

"Q. Did you find the country interspersed with numerous muskegs, and occasional areas of better soil? A. That is the character of the country."

"Q. Would your remarks apply to that portion of the line immediately west of Selkirk, on the located line, or to the country further west? A. Immediately west of Selkirk, the land is tolerably good, but it soon becomes low and swampy."

Mr. Milner Hart appeared before the same Committee, with this result:—

"I do not call it a very good country; it is not as good land as that to the south of Lake Manitoba; it is a gravelly country, full of large swamps."

Mr. Marcus Smith, acting Chief Engineer, says, in his report for 1877:—

"The 'telegraph' line is erected and in operation between Selkirk and Livingstone, 271 miles. Where it crosses certain lakes, ponds and marshes, a number of poles require to be more permanently secured."

These extracts, culled from many which could be effectively used, are quoted to show that already sufficient evidence has been officially given to condemn the present route of the telegraph line. The reasons which led you to change the location of the railway from the north to the south of Lake Manitoba, apply with equal force to the telegraph line. The selection of the present route, by the late Government, was an act of unpardonable incompetency, for which no legitimate excuse can be given. The unquestioned testimony of a large number of the Government engineering staff, the

unanimous report of the Dominion land surveyors, and the freely expressed opinion of private individuals who know the country well, unite in showing that the present route is impracticable, and that, so long as it is adhered to, constant or even frequent telegraphic communication with the North-West will be unattainable.

#### THE ENORMOUS COST.

Unfortunately the cost of the line has been enormous. For construction of the section from Winnipeg to Pelly, 294 miles, Messrs Sifton, Glass & Co., received \$492 per mile for the forest portion and \$189 per mile for the prairie portion. For the Livingstone to Edmonton section, Mr. Fuller received \$213.18 per mile. For maintenance, Messrs. Sifton, Glass & Co., receive \$16 per mile per annum, Mr. Fuller getting a lump sum of \$13,000 per year. In defence of the high rates paid for construction it may be urged that the lowest available tenders were accepted, but this position is not tenable, for it is not doing the late Government an injustice to say that they should not have awarded the contracts at such figures, in face of the fact that, making due allowance for the extra expense involved in carting in wire, provisions &c., for men, even then the cost was far in excess of what has been paid by companies in Canada and the United States for their lines. For the price paid, a first-class line in every respect should have been built, but it is of the cheapest and most useless description, the poles, along the greater portion of the route, being miserable attenuated poplar. First-class wood should have been used and the contractors compelled to transport it for some distance when it was not to be had near at hand. The amount paid for maintenance is generally considered to be excessive, even were the line in constant operation. The Engineer-in-Chief informs me that the contractors are only paid for the time the line is in working order, but as the Department does not appear to have any definite information on this point, nor can it well be expected to when the difficulty of obtaining it is considered, the probability is that very little is deducted from the aggregate subsidy to cover the time when communication is interrupted.

#### A USELESS LINE.

In 1875, while defending his action in reference to the construction of the line, Mr. Mackenzie said:—

"He felt from the first that it was absolutely indispensable to have telegraphic communication with the various points on the line, in order to prosecute a successful survey, and in order to conduce to the settlement of the North-West Territories, as well as to lay out the line upon which the road should ultimately be built."

"Indispensable" or not, the fact is that this communication has not been had, except at rare intervals, as will be seen by the subjoined examples. Speaking from personal observation in Winnipeg, from early in May until

September, I can say positively that during the greater portion of that time the line was not working. In July it was down for three weeks. Late in August, Lieut.-Col. W. Osborne Smith, C.M.G., being ordered to the North-West on Militia business, handed in to the Winnipeg office a telegram to Lieut.-Gov. Laird, at Battleford. Col. Smith remained in Winnipeg nine days after this, but up to the date of his departure it had been impossible to get it through. An official telegram handed in to the Battleford office by Col. Smith about September 30th., was similarly delayed. When the Rev. D. M. Gordon, of Ottawa, came east on his way from the Pacific, he found it impossible to send a message from Battleford, and met with a similar disappointment at Humboldt, about a fortnight later. On October 4th., Mr. Carscaden, agent of Messrs. Gerrie & Co., of Winnipeg, telegraphed his firm that he would leave Battleford that day. He drove to Winnipeg, 650 miles, with his cart train, arriving two days before his message. These cases are but a few among many. They are, however, sufficient to show that the line cannot be depended on. The Department of the Interior, which probably had occasion to use it more frequently than any of the other Departments, can, it is said, furnish numerous examples of inconvenience experienced in consequence of being unable to secure communication.

Mr. E. W. Jarvis, giving evidence before the Senate Committee previously referred to, testified :—

“Q. Do you know that there has been any difficulty in keeping up the line from Selkirk to Northcote? A. Yes; there has been great difficulty in keeping it up. A year or two ago the line was down for two or three months.

“Q. Do you know why the line was down? A. Yes; the poles had been stuck up in the snow and frozen moss, and when the snow melted they fell. The contractor could not get in there during the summer, and he had to do the work in the winter.

“Q. Why could he not get in there during the summer? A. I believe it was too swampy to go in there in summer.”

Mr. Tho<sup>s</sup>. White, M.P., in *Chronicles by the Way*, descriptive of his recent trip through the North-West, in speaking of his arrival at Humboldt telegraph station, says :—

“It was before seven o'clock, and the people in charge had just got up. A young woman presented herself at the door, and to our enquiry as to whether the line was working, replied that it was working to Battleford, but that the eastern section was down. Her sister, who acts as operator, told us it was expected to be in working order that day or the next, and we left messages in the hope that her anticipations might prove true. ‘Is the line often down?’ we enquired. ‘Very often,’ she replied. Her husband, who has charge of looking after it, had only this year been home for a fortnight. It is built through the miserable, marshy muskeg, through which it was proposed, under the promptings of the malign influence which has ruled in North-West matters during recent years, to carry the railway, and the poles go down at every storm.

“We crossed the telegraph line about three miles from the station, and for some distance the trail runs alongside of it. It is as miserable a line as could well be imagined, and it is certainly not much to be wondered at that it is an exceptional circumstance when it is in working order. That it was built at all is an evidence of utter folly. The change of the route of the railway will render it useless.”

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Mr. Alex. Taylor, formerly of Ottawa, now in charge of the telegraph office at Hay Lakes, near Edmonton. in a letter to his father, published in THE CITIZEN of the 9th, says :—

"I will explain that line trouble to you. You see Mr. Sifton had the contract from Winnipeg to Pelly by the north of Lake Manitoba; Mr. Fuller from Pelly to where the line ends in bush, 518 miles. If you remember, north of Lake Manitoba, although condemned by Mr. Fleming, was Mr. Mackenzie's idea when he was in power. Sir John Macdonald wants it south of the lake, the proper place, because north of the lake is nothing but muskegs, swamps, etc., and I have been told that Mr. Sifton puts in poles, and in the morning they have sunk out of sight into the muskegs. Now, what kind of a place would that be to build a railroad? Mr. Fuller's end is always in working order. This summer he sent men over it, and put in every second pole new. The timber is poor poplar and balsam of Gilead, and lasts only two years at farthest. This is the reason the line is out of order so often."

The Saskatchewan Herald, published at Battleford, being dependent on the line for its telegraphic news, is peculiarly capable of expressing an opinion on its working. From it these extracts are taken

(October 21, 1878.)

"The following telegrams, dated Winnipeg, Oct. 4th, "were received too late for our last issue. For some time past there has been a weak spot in the line to the east of the Narrows that has baffled all the efforts of the repairers, to find, and some days ago the line broke altogether, and the indications are that it is about the troublesome place."

(November 4, 1878.)

"We are sorry if our readers are disappointed at not finding telegraphic despatches under this heading, but it is no more annoying to them than it is to ourselves. Our news reports are duly prepared, but it is impossible to get them over the lines. Just one month ago we got a despatch giving the result of the elections, and it was several days overdue. Since that time the line has been silent. The fault lies in the eastern section, or what is known as 'Sifton's contract.' To all enquiries at the office here, the answer has been the same, 'no news; line down east of Pelly,' or, 'line down at the Narrows,' or, 'leaking so badly we can do nothing'; the fault always being at the eastern end. That the line should be out of order occasionally would not be surprising; but when it works badly for months, and remains closed for weeks at a time, the matter demands investigation and correction. Since early last spring the line has not been in good working order, for at the belt of pines it leaked so badly that it was with difficulty it could be worked, and now all communication with the outer world is completely shut off. The contractor gets paid for keeping the line in order, and the Government should see that it is properly done. The object of the Government in building it, that quick communication might be had between these outlying regions and the seat of government, on occasions of emergency, is frustrated, and sore inconvenience is the daily result. The contractor owes it to himself, as well as to the Government and the public, to see that this state of things no longer continue, but to find out whose and where the fault is, and to apply a prompt and effectual remedy."

(December 2, 1878.)

"For the first time this fall, the telegraph line was worked through to Winnipeg on the 26th. This is one of the longest circuits on the continent, it being about 650 miles by the line from this place to Winnipeg."

(August 11, 1879.)

An article with reference to the non-arrival of money for the treaty payments concludes: "As usual, on all occasions of importance, the telegraph line is not working."

(August 11, 1879.)

"The telegraph line got into working order yesterday evening for the first time in two weeks. We tried to get a despatch in time for to-day's paper, but could not."

(September 6, 1879.)

"Owing to the telegraph line being down, we are at a loss to know what Indian outrages are being perpetrated in our midst, as well as how matters are progressing in the outer world. It may be news to our eastern friends to learn that the Government proposes to build a line on dry land south of Lake Manitoba, to connect with the present line somewhere west of the muskegs. That is a rumour that got into circulation here, no one seemed to know how; but as we have no notice of it in the eastern press, we fear it is too good to be true."

(November 3, 1879.)

"The telegraph has been out of order for a long time. Mr. Hall recently went along the line as far as the South Branch, but was unable to communicate with any point further east. Freighters report immense districts as being burned over. The line opened as far as Pelly on Friday last, but was closed below."

#### TARIFF OF CHARGES.

In his last annual report, the Engineer-in-Chief very properly refers to the exorbitant tariff of charges, the contractors deciding their own rates, not subject to approval by the Government. A writer in the *Saskatchewan Herald* of May 5th, 1879, very justly complained of having had to pay \$2.50 for a message of ten words from Edmonton to Winnipeg. Of a more unjust case I have personal knowledge, having in September been charged \$2 for a message of ten words from Humboldt to Winnipeg, a distance of a little over 400 miles. Not having a copy of the tariff, it is impossible to speak of it in greater detail. The two cases cited are sufficient to show that the charges are monstrously excessive; and that, in order to secure the adoption of an equitable rate, it is decidedly necessary that the tariff should be subject to Government approval.

#### THE FUTURE OF THE LINE.

The necessity of uninterrupted communication with the North-West, while important to the Department over which you preside, and to the Militia, as well as other branches of the public service, is far greater to the Department of the Interior, which, especially in the transaction of business relating to its Indian and Mounted Police branches, requires to be in a position to use the wires almost constantly. In addition to the requirements of the public service in this respect, the interests of the commercial community have to be taken into consideration. With the exception of one or two points on the



Little Saskatchewan, the settlements in the Territories only receive and dispatch a mail once in three weeks. The large trade done by many of the merchants, particularly in the Prince Albert, Stobart, Battleford and Edmonton districts, requires that they should be in a position to use the telegraph when necessary. Now, this cannot be done except on rare occasions; and it is no uncommon thing for special messengers sent from Prince Albert or Stobart to the telegraph station at Humboldt, distances of about 100 miles and 70 miles respectively, to find on arrival that the line is not working, and that it is impossible to get a message dispatched and an answer received.

The rapidity with which the settlements are increasing, their growing trade, and the vigorous manner in which several important enterprises are now being pushed, render a discontinuance of the present system an absolute necessity, and call for such a change as will give continuity in the route. The line from Lake Superior to Selkirk appears to give general satisfaction, to be in constant working order, and to carry messages at a reasonable rate. Public feeling is strongly in favor of a removal of the section from Selkirk to Fort Pelly, and its reconstruction from Winnipeg along the route of the 100 miles of railway now in course of construction, thence to Fort Ellice, and from there north or north-westerly to connect with Mr. Fuller's section, which is said to be generally working. Such a line would meet the requirements of the railway, suit the business of the Government, prove convenient to Winnipeg and a large portion of the Province, penetrate the Territories along the line of settlement and secure the communication which is so much required. It would pass over a route on which there are no difficulties by muskegs, or, at most, of a very trivial nature, and where good wood for poles could be comparatively easily obtained.

A company, incorporated under the general Act of the Manitoba Legislature, has already in course of construction a line between Winnipeg and Portage de la Prairie. This could be utilised, as they would doubtless be willing to remove it to the route of the railway, and an extension to Fort Ellice, and thence to the Fuller contract could be built early in the summer.

The matter is one worthy the earnest consideration of the Government, and their decided action is eagerly hoped for by the people of Manitoba and the Territories.

I have the honor to be, sir,  
Your obedient servant,

ACTON BURROWS.

OTTAWA, Dec. 13, 1879.

Since the foregoing was written the following facts have been noticed:—

#### SURVEYORS WITHOUT INSTRUCTIONS.

- The Canadian Pacific Railway survey party, 17 men in all, left for Winnipeg

on the 25th. They lay here several days trying to get a message through to and instructions back from Ottawa, but as the line was down as usual, they were unable to do so. They left their mules here to winter."—*Edmonton correspondence of Oct. 30th, in Saskatchewan Herald of Nov. 17, 1879.*

#### THE LINE IN 1877.

"As the working of the telegraph line from Winnipeg westward continued unsatisfactory, I was unable, during the past summer, to make the determination of longitude of the principal points essential to the more correct carrying out of the careful system inaugurated by the special survey."—*Report of Mr. Lindsay Russell, Surveyor-General, 1877.*

#### A DELAYED THANKSGIVING.

Owing to the line not being in working order, a telegram to Lieut. Governor Laird did not reach Battleford early enough in November to have a day of thanksgiving proclaimed in the North-West Territories for the same day as in the other Provinces.

